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ABSTRACT

The development of the secondary language arts program for nonacademic students in the Florence, South Carolina, public schools is examined. The basic concern underlying this program is the psychological needs of individual students, coupled with the teacher's acceptance of the student's social and educational status. The framework of the curriculum is built around the student's achievement level rather than traditional grade requirements; thus, there are seven phases of achievement within which reading grade level ranges from nonreading to grade 10. Students meet in their language arts classes for two-period time blocks daily, moving from one phase to the next at their own rates. The communication skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are taught at each phase, these skills being organized around a six-element framework intended to establish guidelines and provide sequence and continuity in the curriculum: (1) needs of teenagers, (2) goals to be accomplished, (3) skills to be developed, (4) methods of instruction, (5) materials to be used, and (6) assessment and evaluation. Teachers involved in the program are preparing an operational guide to define more clearly the objectives of the program and to coordinate the program of studies in the seven phases. Examples of the curriculum content of Phase 1 are included. (VJ)

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Developing a Language Arts Curriculum for Nonacademic Teenagers

Session: Language Arts--Junior/Senior High School Level

In the past few years much has been said and much has been written about developing a secondary English curriculum relevant to today's teenager. Innovations described as panaceas for improving instruction have come to the forefront. Team teaching, individualized instruction, programmed learning, modular scheduling, and instructional television are but a few of the terms being used today to describe transitions in curriculum development. None of these will be effective unless schools consider the needs, interests, attitudes and values of today's teenagers as curriculum decisions are made.

As long as studies show that approximately 750,000 of the nation's

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youngsters annually drop out of school before high school graduation, schools must admit that current programs are not relevant and fail to tap the talents and resources that lie dormant in thousands of young people.

A comprehensive secondary language arts program must consider the academic needs of students whose abilities are superior and skills are sophisticated as well as the potential dropout, barely able to read, and socially immature. This paper is concerned specifically with the development of a language arts curriculum geared to the nonacademic teenager who finds academic achievement difficult and who is not primarily interested in furthering his education beyond high school.

The secondary language arts program in the Florence Public Schools will be used as an example of how one school district developed an English curriculum to meet the needs of nonacademic students. Located in the tobacco belt of South Carolina, the district includes the city of Florence, population 62,000, and the outlying agricultural and industrial sections. The total school enrollment of 15,000 students comes from various socio-economic levels ranging from very low to high middle class families.

Planning for curriculum change

Need for curriculum revision. In 1963 the basic English curriculum was modified by replacing the literature book with another on one reading level below the actual grade level but the grammar book was the same as that used by the academic students. A remedial reading program in the junior high schools included thirty classes with seven teachers. The results of 1967 random testing of nonacademic students in grades seven

through ten revealed a wide range of reading abilities within the classroom and the inadequacy of the existing English program.

Preliminary planning. In January of 1968, the state supervisors of English and reading, secondary principals, guidance counselors, reading teachers, and English teachers were invited to discuss plans for developing a coordinated program of English and reading. Attendance was voluntary and some came only one time. Those, who realized the irrelevance of the existing English program, discussed the need for developing a language arts curriculum based on levels of achievement rather than traditional grades.

Preliminary planning included developing a philosophy, setting up tentative objectives, studying the trends in teaching English, scheduling teacher-training programs, and previewing, evaluating and selecting instructional materials.

A one-week workshop was held in August for the twenty-four teachers who expressed an interest in and desire to participate in the program. Dr. Harold Herber, Syracuse University, and the state supervisors of English and reading discussed problems faced by classroom teachers in adjusting methods and materials to the needs of students.

Organizing the curriculum

Philosophy and objectives. The philosophy undergirding the development of a language arts curriculum for nonacademic teenagers must be one that has as its basic concern the psychological needs of the individual

student---his ability, interests, attitudes, self-concept, cultural values, and goals. It must also be a philosophy of acceptance----accepting the teenager where he is on the learning continuum including his dialect, his reading level, his ability to write, and his rate of learning.

One of the English teachers summed up the philosophy that must exist in a successful program in this way, "Before we can teach nonacademic teenagers, we must let them know that we care about them and their problems. They need warmth and understanding from us and they need to know that we accept them as they are."

After the philosophy has been clearly formulated and understood, realistic objectives must be established. Teachers set the following overall objectives for the Florence language arts program:

1. To help each student realize that he can succeed.
2. To teach students that communication skills are important.
3. To teach students that reading <u>is</u> enjoyable.
4. To teach students to think; to make intellectual choices and decisions; and to become more independent learners.
5. To strive to meet individual needs of all students.
6. To teach students and not pages of books.

<u>Phases of the curriculum.</u> Different types of curriculum organization were studied and discussed. It was obvious that the framework of the new language arts curriculum must be built around the achievement levels of students rather than traditional grade requirements. Based on results of previous testing, the language arts curriculum was organized around seven phases of achievement.

Phases of Language Arts Program

Phase	Reading Grade Level
I	R-3
II	4-5
III	5-6
IV	6-7
V	7-8
VI	8-9
VII	9-10

Each phase provides a flexible learning situation directly related to the achievement of the student and his learning rate rather than to the traditional requirements of the grade to which he has been promoted. A student who learns at a slow rate will remain in a phase indefinitely, even a year or more, while others move quickly through the phases. Students may move from one teacher to another if their needs can be more adequately met in another group.

In a multiphased curriculum all students are scheduled according to where they are on the learning continuum rather than by number of years in school, chronological age, and grade promotion, which are characteristics of the lock-step graded school. Students from different grade levels are grouped together according to achievement. This has posed no problem since student needs, interests, and abilities overlap chronological ages and grade levels. Classes are scheduled for two-period time blocks each day. Senior-high students receive one unit for English and one for remedial reading toward their graduation course requirements.

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Developing the curriculum

A course of study, based upon the above outlined philosophy and objectives, was developed for each phase of the curriculum. The communication skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are taught as components of the total language arts program instead of in isolation. The following framework is intended to establish guidelines and provide for sequence and continuity in the curriculum.

Needs of teenagers. Needs refer to the developing psychological feelings, interests, and purposes in a child's life dictated by the society in which he lives. Language behavior develops as the student needs to communicate his feelings, interests, and motivations to others. The communication skills cannot develop outside the mediation of social interaction. Therefore, how language develops is directly related to this interaction. The teacher's role becomes that of understanding the diverse cultural needs---anxieties, frustrations, interests, motivations---and creating a classroom environment appropriate to channeling these diverse needs toward appropriate ways of behavior whether reading for survival or writing to inform.

Goals to be accomplished. Goals refer to those language modifications which the student is led to make through social pressures of the classroom environment. Goals are the socially acceptable language behaviors; he accepts the goal to listen, rather than to be inattentive; he accepts the goal of reading orally to a group, rather than of mute withdrawal; he accepts the goal to expand his language, rather than to experience social rejection.

Skills to be developed. Skills refer to the parts of a task which, when learned, make up proficient behavior for the whole task. For example, the behavior known as "speaking" includes many skills: voice, tone, pitch, enunciation, correct pronunciation, etc. Skills of a particular behavior may be taught separately but the learner must be constantly aware of the completed task for which the sub-skill is a part.

Methods of instruction. Methods refer to the teaching procedures used in meeting the needs of individual students. It is how a teacher uses materials or develops skills. Since different students learn in different ways, alternate instructional methods should be included in the curriculum.

Materials to be used. Materials refer to commercial or teacher-made devices which contain exercises and activities for the learning of one or more skills. To meet the individual needs of all students, extensive basic and supportive materials must be made readily available.

Assessment and evaluation. Evaluation refers to the measures used to determine the degree to which goals have been reached. This is usually done by assessing separate skills through objective evaluation, using standardized tests, or subjective evaluation using teacher observation, checklists, etc. Since the established goals are student-centered, the evaluation procedures are centered around individual student achievement of the language arts skills.

Each of the six elements are necessary parts of the framework of a comprehensive language arts curriculum. No one element can be isolated

from the others. Each one, from the needs of the teenager to the evaluation, must be interrelated to provide a coordinated program of studies.

Illustrating curriculum content

The framework, described above, was used to develop the course of study for each of the communication skills in each phase of the curriculum. Time does not permit an explanation of this procedure for all the phases, therefore, I have elected to illustrate the development of curriculum content by using Phase I. This phase of the curriculum is designed for students who find listening, speaking, reading and writing quite difficult and have serious problems with basic skills.

Developing listening skills. Nonacademic students, achieving on a primary level, need to realize that learning can come through listening and success can be experienced through listening. Goals to be accomplished include acquiring the ability to distinguish between correct and incorrect speech patterns, broadening experiential backgrounds, and fostering language development as a result of a listening experience. These teenagers need to increase skill in auditory discrimination, to listen to directions and follow them, and to listen and recall events in a sequence.

To develop listening skills, opportunities are given students to hear, listen, and understand through class and small group discussions, teachers' explanations, conversations, dramatizations, oral reports, recordings, phonic tapes, listening skill tapes, coordinated books and tapes, educational television, and use of the Language Master. Other approaches place emphasis on listening to background music while writing,

listening to oral reading by students and teachers, playing listening games, completing listening exercises in labs and listening to records coordinated with filmstrips. After a poem is read or a record played, students are encouraged to listen and picture in their minds what they hear, then relate it to the class. Various sounds and voices, in and out of the classroom, are recorded and then identified.

Change in behavior can be evaluated through teacher observation and peer reaction. Improvement in speech patterns, the ability to follow directions, the ability to answer questions on oral reading, and the development of pride in learning through listening indicate that goals have been accomplished.

Developing oral language skills. In order for students to feel secure in expressing their thoughts orally, teachers must accept their dialects and oral language patterns. Some students need to expand their own language, to develop speech patterns socially acceptable to the locale, and to realize that different levels of usage are used for different occasions. Acquiring the ability to use a telephone properly, to communicate with a prospective employer, and to converse with peers and adults without fear of being misunderstood are important to these youngsters.

Oral language skills are improved by providing experiences for talking, talking, talking. Through role playing, e.g., portraying teenage problems, simulating telephone conversations and interviews for employment, opportunities are given for oral expression. Rather than having students memorize the rule that a subject must agree with its verb, oral sentence pattern drills are used. Students, grouped by

pairing, practice language development by using teacher-made oral sentence pattern drills, oral language practice books, and oral reading to partners. Other activities include choral reading and echo reading, taping conversations and listening to their own usage and pronunciations, practicing acceptable pronunciations on Language Master, retelling stories, recording different dialects within the class or school, and compiling slang dictionaries.

The degree of oral language improvement is evaluated by comparing short taped conversations of students recorded at the beginning and at the end of the year. Another technique is to simulate two to three minute interviews where students strive to converse in socially acceptable language.

Developing skills for reading. The reading levels of Phase I students range from nonreaders to fourth-grade level. Year by year, they have been traditionally promoted. By the time they reach the secondary school, many teachers will quickly tell you that Sammie can't read now, probably never will, and should never have been promoted. Their reading deficiencies make them potential dropouts.

First, these teenagers need to realize the practicality of learning to read better, that to acquire important information it is necessary to master basic reading skills. Although their reading progress is very slow, they need to receive genuine praise and to be treated as adolescents, not children.

Reading goals are those necessary for survival in society. Emphasis is placed on life-related activities such as reading newspapers; using telephone directories; obtaining a social security card; filling out

forms; interpreting credit, savings, and interest rates; writing checks; and understanding driver regulations, road maps, and highway signs.

A language-experience approach is used with nonreaders. They dictate stories about their own experiences to a classmate who is the "secretary." The vocabulary is in their vernacula and is "real" to them, whereas, many of the commercial materials are not in the realm of their experiences. Phrases of a "survival" vocabulary such as "one way street," "emergency exit," or "speed checked by radar" are practiced on a Language Master.

Special vocabulary terms found on standard forms, e.g., "maiden name," "past employment," "education," "confidential," are learned in class discussions. Practical application of these terms is made by having students fill out job, insurance, accident and selective service forms. After comparing prices in newspaper ads, students are given an opportunity to practice check writing by filling out "mock" checks in payment for the week's groceries. Teenagers learn to fill out money orders, send telegrams, apply for credit, and start savings accounts.

Another activity used to extend vocabulary is having each student make a cumulative list of words that is of personal interest to him. For some boys, the lists may include hot rods, drag racing, surfing, soul music, names of cars, e.g., "Cougar," "Mustang," and "Charger." For the girls, you may find words as dating, romantic, mini or midi skirts, make-up, and fashions. Card files may include an accumulation of words that will be useful in a selected vocational field; terms from radio, television, and films; words describing a hobby; and troublesome words in social studies, science, and math.

Multiple skilltexts on various levels of difficulty, skilltapes, commercial and teacher-made games, and multi-level labs are used in

building and reinforcing reading skills. The newspaper is one of the most relevant and cheapest "textbooks" that can be used to "turn on" nonacademic teenagers. Some will be able to recognize only an occasional word in a headline, on the sports page, or in a comic strip. The possibilities of using the newspaper as a tool to teach vocabulary, comprehension, and spelling are unlimited.

One of the most important aspects of the reading program, and one which is often overlooked, is that of inspiring nonacademic teenagers to read just for the fun of reading. Thousands of books, mostly paperbacks carefully selected on all reading and interest levels, are made available through classroom libraries.

Developing composition skills. The nonacademic teenager needs to know that his written thoughts will be warmly accepted, regardless of length and correctness of form. He must be able to feel that what he has to say is important, that it will be understood, even if he has to read it to the teacher. Writing something down on paper must come first, before activities to improve writing can begin.

Goals are to get the student to write, to overcome his fear of writing, to improve his ability to express himself clearly, and to feel independent and self-confident.

In the Florence program, no formal grammar books are used. The philosophy of learning to write through the practice of writing is emphasized. A student is permitted to express his thoughts without the fear of being critized orally or having his paper covered with red marks. Teachers often ask students to help find their errors, concentrating on only one kind of error at a time. Mechanics and the improvement of

usage are taught by correcting errors made by students, not from memorizing grammar rules or filling in blanks in a sentence.

How can students who have few basic writing skills be motivated to want to write? Have them write about personal experiences, about the life they actually know. Relaxed, unpressured writing activities, as in journals, give teenagers opportunities to express their thoughts without fear of criticism. Class discussions about topics of current interest, e.g., drugs, peace in Vietnam, dating, marriage, sports, are directed to a point where everyone wants to talk. Then, students are asked to put their thoughts into writing.

Magazine pictures, cartoons, paintings, recordings, films, filmstrips, transparencies, unfinished stories, and startling sentences are used as stimuli for free-response writing. Expository efforts such as writing a short paragraph on "How to Teach a Dog Tricks" or "How to Apply Make-up" are utilized. Pretending "If I Were," for instance a pencil, a piece of chewing gum or "Dear Abbey," motivates some students to express their thoughts. Some are interested in writing simple radio or television scripts.

At the beginning of the year, some students are able to write only a few words or sentences. Later they write longer compositions with more clarity of expression.

Developing a curriculum guide

As the program progressed, there was a need for the development of an operational guide to define more clearly the objectives and to coordinate the program of studies in the different phases. Language arts teachers with the assistance of Dr. Paul Berg, University of South Carolina,

suggested the format, using the six elements of the curriculum as guidelines.

Worksheets, listing each element, each language arts skill and each phase, were developed. Teachers were asked to write suggestions as to how the goals could be achieved, based upon the needs. Departmental meetings and workshops provided opportunities for teachers to assimilate worksheets and discuss them as a group. A questionnaire was used to get ideas and to discover teachers with special interest areas. Representatives from each school were given released time to work with Dr. Berg.

Teachers, using the worksheets as a guideline, make practical suggestions for effective instruction, recommend changes, then, return the guides at the end of the year. They are reprinted after necessary changes are made. The writing is a continuous process, not a specific project, and will never be finished. Learning, for teachers, takes place through actual participation.

The success achi ed by each individual is the measure of how relevant and meaningful is the curriculum for today's nonacademic teenager. Lower absentee and dropout rates, fewer discipline problems, improved attitudes toward education in general are all positive evidences that an innovative English curriculum, concerned with psychological as well as academic needs, is more appropriate for the youth of the seventies.